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# Planning for the Future: Changing Education Expectations in Three British Cohorts

Ingrid Schoon \*

**Abstract:** »Zukunftspläne: Veränderungen in den Bildungszielen bei drei britischen Kohorten«. This paper examines changing educational expectations in three British age cohorts born in 1958, 1970 and 1989/90. A pathway model is tested to examine the associations between parental education, academic attainment, school motivation and education expectations among young people and their parents in a changing social context. The findings suggest that educational expectations have increased considerably between 1974 and 2006. In the most recent cohort education expectations at age 16 are more loosely linked to parental education and previous academic attainment, suggesting that expectations for further education are becoming the norm. Furthermore, there are persisting social inequalities in attainment, as well as an increasing gender gap in expectations, with girls being more ambitious regarding their educational goals than boys. Findings are discussed in terms of changing norms and expectations for young people in a changing socio-historical context.

**Keywords:** social change, education expectations, school motivation, gender.

## Planning for the Future: Changing Education Expectations in Three British Cohorts

During the second half of the twentieth century education and employment opportunities in most Western countries have changed dramatically, following the introduction of new technologies and the disappearance of manual jobs. Between 1951 and 1991 the United Kingdom, for example, witnessed a significant decline in manual jobs, while employment in clerical occupations has increased, and work in professional and managerial professions has tripled (Gallie, 2000). In the era of growing knowledge economies increasing numbers of young people are expected to participate in further education beyond the compulsory schooling age, once the preserve of a relative privileged minority (Goyette, 2008; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Schoon, 2006). Based on findings in the US, it has been argued that expecta-

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tions regarding further education have generally increased, reflecting the emergence of a new norm of ‘college for everyone’ regardless of academic aptitude or social background (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001; Rosenbaum, 2001). Likewise in the UK, it has been claimed that rising education expectations results from beliefs that more education improves chances for attaining better jobs, higher wages, and social status – although not all young people will be able to realize their ambitions, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, i.e. those who lack the financial and/or academic resources (Raffo et al., 2007). Furthermore, the expectations expressed by young people may themselves already be constrained by structural factors and socio-economic resources available to the family.

Drawing on data collected for three British age cohorts born in 1958, 1970 and 1989/90 this paper examines changes in education expectations of 16 year olds and their parents, assessing in particular the entrenchment of a new norm of ‘college for all’ in the British samples, as well as a number of possible reasons of why expectations might have grown. The three age cohorts were born at crucial turning points in British social history, as the 1958 cohort grew up during a period of extraordinary economic growth and social transformation, which has been described as a ‘Golden Age’ by Eric Hobsbawm (1995) (Hobsbawm, 1995), whereas the 1970 cohort reached compulsory school leaving age (that is age 16) just at the height of a major economic recession. Although there has been an economic recovery by the turn of the Millennium, the 1989/90 age cohort is again facing a critical economic downturn just as they are reaching compulsory school leaving age. In the following associations between changes on the macro level and individual decision making regarding one’s future career will be examined by comparing experiences in the three age cohorts.

The aims of this paper are firstly to assess the extent to which expectations for further education among 16-year olds have increased between 1974 and 2005, and whether there is a new norm emerging towards further education for all. Secondly, several possible reasons why education expectations might have grown are explored. Beyond the association of changing education expectation to macro level change, it is asked whether the increase in education expectations can be explained due to changing social backgrounds of young people, i.e. the changing educational profile of their parents. It has been argued that as parents of students are themselves more educated, the educational expectations of their offspring have risen (Goyette, 2008). Other explanations concern changing employment opportunities (Blossfeld et al., 2005), as well as changing parental expectations for their children (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Reynolds & Woodham-Burge, 2007; Schoon, 2006). It has also been argued that one explanation for rising educational expectations of young people is that girls have become more ambitious and optimistic about their future, reflecting increasing gender equality in educational and occupational opportunities (Fan & Marini, 2000; Mickelson, 1989).

### Education expectations in times of social change

Educational expectations are a vital expression of how far in the education system young people expect to go, and reflect their subjective assessment of the amount of education they realistically predict to attain. They can help to chart a life course, provide direction for spending time and energy during the school years, and are one of the strongest predictors of future educational and occupational attainments (Hanson, 1994; Marini & Greenberger, 1978; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). In considering different possibilities for their future young people are aware of the barriers that may hinder their ambitions. The expression of education expectations is intertwined with perceptions of opportunities and constraints, and young people from less privileged backgrounds are generally less ambitious than their more privileged peers (Andres, Adamuti-Trache, Yoon, Pidgeon, & Thomsen, 2007; Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Trusty, 1998).

Changes in education expectations have been associated with changes in employment opportunities, in particular the changing labour markets of the growing knowledge economies. Across all industrialised countries young people are now under increasing pressure to continue full-time education beyond the age of 16 years, and to acquire formal qualifications in response to the introduction of new technologies and changing labour market opportunities (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005; Bynner, 2005). Most young people born in 1958 who left school in 1974 could expect to obtain employment regardless of their educational credentials, whereas for young people born in 1970 school attainment became a key prerequisite for employment (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Schoon & Parsons, 2002).

Historically, in Great Britain rates of participation in further education and training are lagging behind those in other OECD economies, resulting in a workforce with fewer skills and qualifications compared to other developed countries. Enrolment rates for 15-19 year olds in the UK are currently well below the OECD average (69.7% in the UK versus 81.5% OECD average) and a comparatively large share of 25-34 year olds have not completed upper secondary education (OECD, 2008). In a move to create a workforce with relevant skills and qualifications to compete in a global economy the UK Government is currently pursuing a program to widen participation in higher education to 50 per cent among all 18-30 year olds by the year 2010. To achieve the target of 'widening participation' and to recruit students from previously underrepresented groups, in particular from those from less privileged backgrounds, a variety of policies have been put in place. The introduction of a national curriculum and a unified system of secondary school qualifications in England during the 1980s, and the introduction of more vocational qualification and foundation courses have been associated with improvements in average attainment levels among those completing compulsory schooling and changing perceptions of further education which is no longer perceived as only an option

reserved for an academic elite (Ashford, Gray, & Tranmer, 1993; Gray, Jesson, & Tranmer, 1993). In 2001 the *Connexions* service has been introduced offering both individual support and career advice to young people navigating the increasingly complex education and careers landscape (Hoggart and Smith, 2004), and since 2004 an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) offers payments of up to £30 a week for 16-19 year olds who stay in further education and training beyond compulsory school leaving age (Dearden et al., 2009). The 'Aimhigher' programme (initially established as the Excellence Challenge programme in 2001) has been rolled out in 2007 with the intention to raise educational expectations among young people from previously underrepresented groups to participate in further education. First evaluations of the programme suggest that there has been an increase in positive attitudes towards higher education among disadvantaged young people (Ireland, Golden, & Morris, 2006; Morris & Golden, 2005).

To what extent these attitudes will be translated into education participation still has to be seen, especially since, on the other hand, state benefits for young people have been withdrawn and tuition fees for tertiary education have increased (Jones, 2009). Rising youth unemployment and changes in benefit regulations are other possible explanations for increasing education expectations and the rapid expansion of participation in further education. Between 1979 and 1987 the UK experienced the sharpest rise in unemployment since World War II. Compared to the early 1970s, when most of the 1958 cohort completed their compulsory schooling, unemployment rates in almost all developed countries have risen dramatically since the 1980s (ILO & Organization, 2008; Müller & Gangl, 2003). Young people have been hit particularly hard by the economic downturn, as unemployment and flexible employment among the young is generally higher than average (Blossfeld et al., 2005; O'Higgins, 2004). The low probability of finding employment made it more attractive for young people to remain in full-time education beyond age 16, especially since changes in benefit regulations introduced in 1988 effectively ended payments to unemployed young people below the age of 18 years (McVicar & Rice, 2001). Following an economic recovery during the beginning of the second Millennium, young people making their way into the labour market now are again facing increasing uncertainty regarding their employment prospects amidst a major credit crunch and economic downturn which started in the autumn of 2008. It has been argued that in recession economies and times of rapid structural change young people tend to postpone labour market entry and continue in further education (Reitzle, Vondracek, & Silbereisen, 1998). Thus it comes as no big surprise that since the 1980s there has been a continuous rise of young people participating in further and higher education, once the preserve of a privileged minority (Bynner & Parsons, 1997; McVicar & Rice, 2001).

### Changing social backgrounds of students

Beyond changes on the macro level there are also demographic changes in the more proximal contexts, that is regarding the family context. According to theories of social reproduction educational expectations are circumscribed by family social background, and in their consideration of which careers are possible young people are guided by their parents and orient themselves to social class reference groups (McClelland, 1990; Rosen, 1956; Sewell & Shah, 1968). Young people from less privileged social backgrounds generally report lower educational expectations than their more privileged peers, even after controlling for academic ability (Kerckhoff, 2001; Schnabel, Alfeld, Eccles, Koller, & Baumert, 2002; Schoon, 2009). Since the 1970s educational expectations have generally increased, also among less privileged students. Current generations of young people expect and attain more education than previous ones (Reynolds and Pemberton 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Schoon, 2006), and this general increase in educational expectations can in part be attributed to the changing educational profiles of their parents (Goyette, 2008). Children born to better educated parents express higher educational expectations, whereby both mother's and the father's education appear to play a role (Fan & Marini, 2000).

Previous research has also identified a related factor, the role of parental encouragement, as another crucial influence in shaping young people's expectations (Neuenschwander, Vida, Garrett, & Eccles, 2007; Schnabel et al., 2002). Parental expectations for their children have a significant effect on their achievement and adjustment even after other factors, such as social class, parental education and poverty have been taken into account (Osborn, 1990; Schoon et al., 2007; Scott, 2004). Parental expectations have also been identified as one factor underlying gender differences in educational expectations. Surveys of students in the 1950s and 1960s show that although girls attained on average higher grades than boys, they received less encouragement from their parents and had lower educational expectations (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Marini & Greenberger, 1978; Sewell, Hauser, & Wolf, 1980). More recent research however indicates a move towards less gender biased attitudes and expectations both among parents and their children (Schoon, 2006; Tinklin, 2003). Furthermore increasing female participation in the workforce and expanding opportunities for college educated women suggest that for contemporary cohorts, parental expectations for further education no longer favour boys (Brewster & Padavic, 2000; Fan & Marini, 2000).

### Gender differences in educational expectations

Until recently the majority of research on gender differences in educational opportunities and attainment has focused on the ways in which girls are disadvantaged in comparison to boys. In the early 1970s women tended to gain fewer formal qualifications and were underrepresented in the Universities. In

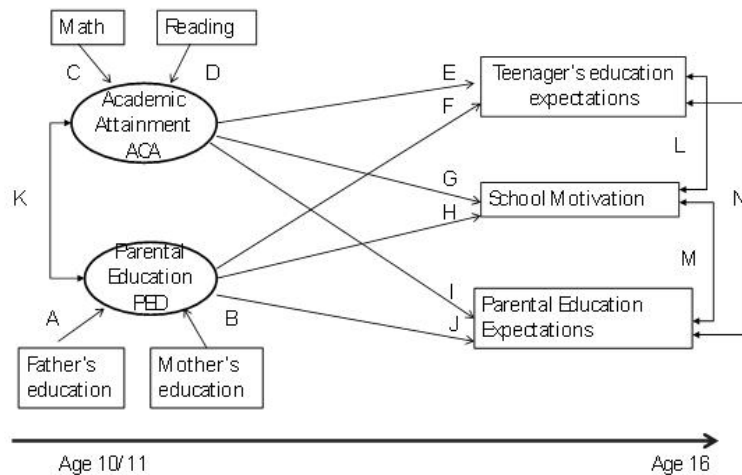
the UK the Sex Discrimination Act which was introduced in 1975 made it unlawful to treat girls differently from boys regarding access to educational and occupational opportunities. By the early 1980s the situation started to change and the sex ratio of first year students reached parity between the genders. With the increasing participation and engagement of women in further education the public debate regarding gender differences started to change, following evidence suggestion that boys are falling behind, that they fail to improve their educational performance at the same rate as girls, and that girls are overtaking boys in their academic motivation and the level of qualifications obtained (Arnot, 2002). The success and achievements of girls in the school system in the United Kingdom has been hailed as a story of extraordinary success of post-war egalitarian movements. To some extent the shift in the gender balance, with girls catching up or overtaking boys in their academic motivation and academic attainments, has brought about something of a moral panic asking the government to act in the name of underachieving boys to retrieve their educational advantage (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Younger & Warrington, 2006). The threat of boy's disengagement with the educational system is of particular concern in the current era of growing knowledge economies requiring a highly skilled labour force. On the other hand, some have argued that recent gains of women in the educational system is something of an 'anomaly', a trend that should not have happened given persistent disadvantages for women regarding subject choice and opportunities in higher education and the workplace (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; Mickelson, 1989). In the following it will be examined whether gender differences in educational expectations increase across the different age cohorts, or whether they remain, especially after adjusting for academic ability and family background factors, such as parental education and parental support for further education.

### A life course perspective

Bringing together the multiple interlinked influences shaping development in a changing socio-historical context, this paper adopts a life course perspective. Human development is understood to be shaped by multiple levels of influence that interact over time (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), differentiating more distal influences such as societal norms and more proximal contexts operating in the family environment. The approach also takes into account the developmental integration of earlier levels of adjustment into later ones, and the embeddedness of human development in socio-historical change (Elder, 1998), linking macro- and micro-level change. The approach enables a better understanding of the potential role of social change for psychosocial development, conceptualising development as action in a changing context (see Silbereisen & Tomasik, this issue). The life course is understood to be socially structured by a set of formal or institutionalised rules prescribing the sequencing and timing of

transitions, such as the transition from school to work. Such normative patterns are however subject to change. Changes can be brought about through influences from the wider socio-historical context in which the pathways are embedded as well as through individual agency or collective action (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2004).

Figure 1: Pathway model linking parental education and academic attainment at age 10/11 to education expectations and school motivation at age 16



Note: Unilateral arrows depict presumed causal relations in the model and bilateral arrows depict correlations.

Drawing on data collected for three British age cohorts, the formation of educational expectations is assessed in relation to socio-economic family background, gender, and the wider socio-historical context. Figure 1 gives a diagrammatic depiction of the pathways to be examined. The usual structural equation modeling conventions are used, with the latent variable shown as a circle and manifest variables in rectangles. Single headed arrows represent causal influences. The double-headed arrow represents the correlation between independent variables. Unique and error variance for each manifest variable and disturbance on the latent variables are included in the model (not shown in the diagram).

It is assumed that family social background is associated with early academic attainment. The two variables share some genetic as well as environmental influences, and were operationalised as correlated independent variables. This approach is considered as a preferable, theory-neutral, position until more is known about the causal relations and patterns of interaction of these two variables (Deary et al., 2005). Family social status and early academic



attainment are hypothesised to influence the education expectations of young people and their parents, as well as the school motivation of the young people, which in turn are assumed to be interrelated. The model will be tested in the three age cohorts to assess potential changes in the associations linking family social background, academic attainment, school motivation, and parental expectations to education expectations expressed by young people.

### The British Cohort Studies

The findings reported here are based on three British age cohort studies: the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS), the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) born in 1989/90. NCDS and BCS70 both comprise data collected from large nationally representative samples of over 16,000 individuals born in single weeks in 1958 and 1970 who have been followed from birth to adulthood, using personal interviews and self completion questionnaires (for more details see <<http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk>>). Data for cohort members in NCDS were collected at birth and at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 42, 46 and 50 years (Power & Elliott, 2006). For BCS70 data collection sweeps have taken place at birth and when the cohort members were aged 5, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34 and 38 years (Elliott & Shepherd, 2006). The sampling strategy for LSYPE was different than that for NCDS and BCS70. LSYPE is a panel study of just over 21,000 young people born between 1st September 1989 and 31st August 1990. Sample members were all young people in year 9 or equivalent in all schools in England in February 2004. Annual face-to-face interviews were conducted with young people and their parents since 2004, and linkage is available to other administrative data, such as those held on the National Pupil Database (for more information see: <<http://www.esds.ac.uk/longitudinal/access/lsype/L5545.asp>>). Special sample weights have to be applied to account for differential selection probabilities and non response bias.

### Measures

In all three cohorts information on parental education was collected. Here the data was dichotomised to indicate whether the father and the mother had continued in full-time education after compulsory schooling or not. At age 10/11 the student's math and reading ability was tested. In NCDS and BCS specially designed assessments were used to test academic abilities (for more information see Schoon, 2006). In LSYPE data from the National Pupil Database was accessed. The test data has been z-standardised to enable comparison across cohorts.

At age 16 cohort members as well as their parents were asked about their education expectations. The information was dichotomised, indicating whether a sample member expects to continue with full-time education after compul-

sory schooling at age 16 or not, and whether their parents expected them to continue in further education beyond age 16 or not. In addition the young people completed a 5-item Academic motivation scale (sample items: school is a waste of time; I do not like school). The scale shows good internal consistency for all three cohorts and its validity has been established, showing significant correlations between school motivation and educational expectations (Schoon et al., 2007) and time spend in education (Schoon, 2008). A high score indicates positive school motivation and a low score school disengagement. Scores were z-standardized for further analysis.

### Analytic Samples

The analytic samples used for the study are based on all young people for whom we have data on parental education, academic attainment at age 10/11, parental and teen's education expectations, and school motivation. The samples comprise 8,355 cohort members in NCDS; 6,242 cohort members in BCS70; and 7473 cohort members in LSYPE. In each age cohort we find 51 per cent of males and 40 per cent of females. The analytic samples are largely representative of the original samples, although there is a slight underrepresentation of the more disadvantaged cohort members, i.e. those whose parents were less educated.

### Analytic Strategy

Pathway analysis was carried out using the statistical package Mplus 5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). This method allows analysis of data on mixed measurement level as well as analysis of cases with missing data under the assumption that the data are missing at random (Little & Rubin, 2002).

In line with current practice, several criteria were used to assess the fit of the data to the model. The  $\chi^2$  statistic is overly sensitive to model misspecification when sample sizes are large or the observed variables are non-normally distributed. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) gives a measure of the discrepancy in fit per degrees of freedom (e.g. values less than .05 indicate a good fit). The final index of choice is the comparative fit index (CFI), indicating if the model provides significantly better explanation of the relations between variables than the null hypothesis-model with no relations between variables. Values above .95 indicate an acceptable fit (Bentler, 1990).

In a first step the descriptive statistics for the dichotomous variables included in the model are reported, and then the pathways linking parental education, early academic attainment, educational expectations and school motivation are assessed.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the 3 age cohorts: 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS), 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), and 1989/90 Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). Parental education, parental and teen's own educational expectations (%)

	NCDS	BCS70	LSYPE
Assessments made in	1974	1986	2006
Parental education PED			
% Father left at min age	78.1	70.4	52.5
% mother left at min age	78.0	69.4	57.4
Parents expect further education			
For their sons	45.5	56.6	76.4
For their daughters	52.6	65.7	89.8
Teen expectations for further education			
Boys	37.1	58.3	82.0
Girls	38.7	62.9	93.6
N	8355	6242	7473

## Results

Table 1 gives the descriptive statistics for the dichotomized variables included in the model for each cohort. The findings suggest that parents of young people in the LSYPE cohort are better educated than those in either BCS70 or NCDS. We can also see a general increase in educational expectations both among parents and their children. While the majority of young people born in 1958 wanted to leave school at age 16, about three fifth of young men and women born in 1970 wanted to continue with further education after compulsory school leaving age. This has increased to more than four fifths among young people born in 1989/90. We can see that girls are more ambitious in their educational expectations than boys. There has also been an increase in parental expectations for their children. Expectations regarding further education are generally higher for daughters than for sons. Given the gender differences in expectations and attainment separate models were run for men and women in each of the cohorts.

Table 2 gives the estimated pathway coefficients and covariates for men and women separately in each cohort. The numerical values refer to standardised regression weights that may be squared to obtain the variance shared by adjacent variables. All paths in the model were significant (parameter estimates divided by their standard errors), and the model provides a good fit to the data for both men and women in the three cohorts. Gender and cohort differences in pathway coefficients were tested using t-tests.

Table 2: Pathway Model: Standardised Coefficients and S.E.

	NCDS				BCS				LSYPE			
	Boys		Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys		Girls	
	Est.	S.E.	Est.	S.E.	Est.	S.E.	Est.	S.E.	Est.	S.E.	Est.	S.E.
<b>A</b> PED ← Father's education	.82c	.020	.84c	.021	.83	.021	.77d	.022	.67c,d	.030	.63c,d	.031
<b>B</b> PED ← Mother's education	.79c	.020	.79c	.020	.78	.021	.80	.021	.71c,d	.029	.72c,d	.029
<b>C</b> ACA ← Reading at 10	.85	.008	.86	.009	.85	.009	.84	.010	.88	.011	.88	.012
<b>D</b> ACA ← Maths at 10	.87	.008	.85	.008	.89	.009	.87	.010	.82	.011	.81	.012
<b>E</b> ACA → Teen Education Expectation	.54a,b,c	.026	.47a,b,c	.025	.36a,b	.042	.23a,b	.041	.40c	.040	.33c	.062
<b>F</b> PED → Teen Education Expectation	.31c	.032	.33c	.032	.32	.050	.42	.046	.17c,d	.050	.18c,d	.076
<b>G</b> ACA → School Motivation	.26b,c	.027	.23	.025	.13b	.037	.19	.034	.16c	.029	.17	.034
<b>H</b> PED → School Motivation	.10	.034	.17c	.032	.16	.045	.08	.040	.08	.037	.04c	.042
<b>I</b> ACA → Parental Expectation	.45c	.025	.42b	.025	.40a	.034	.28a,b,d	.033	.34c	.037	.39d	.055
<b>J</b> PED → Parental Expectation	.39c	.030	.38	.029	.35	.040	.45d	.043	.25a,c,d	.045	.11a,c,d	.066
<b>K</b> PED ↔ ACA	.59	.019	.54	.019	.54	.018	.54	.020	.56	.025	.59	.027
<b>L</b> Teen Expectation ↔ Parental expectation	.83c	.016	.78d	.018	.83	.026	.84d	.020	.63a,c,d	.030	.54a,c,d	.047
<b>M</b> Teen Expectation ↔ School motivation	.47c	.024	.46b,c	.023	.44a	.033	.35a,b	.030	.30c,d	.028	.32c	.037
<b>N</b> Parental Expectation ↔ School motivation	.44c	.024	.38c	.023	.41	.041	.32	.036	.29c,d	.027	.28c	.031
$\chi^2$ (df)	4.10 (5)		6.53 (5)		4.67 (5)		6.23 (5)		8.66 (5)		11.55 (5)	
CFI	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		.993		.986	
rmsea	.000		.000		.000		.000		.014		.032	
N	4279		4076		3244		2998		3802		3671	

Differences in coefficients between gender and cohorts, testing using t-tests:

a – Gender differences within cohort; b – NCDS and BCS; c – NCDS and LSYPE; d – LSYPE and BCS.

Father's and mother's education loaded strongly on the latent variable indicating parental education (PED) and reading and math attainment at age 10 loaded strongly on the latent variable indicating academic attainment (ACA). There is a strong association between parental education and academic attainment (K) which has hardly changed for the three age cohorts, suggesting persisting social inequalities in academic attainment. Although the association is strong, it does not explain more than a third of the variation in academic attainment. Both parental education and academic attainment are significantly associated with the young person's education expectations, their school motivation, and parental education expectations for their children.

The association between academic attainment and the young person's education expectations (E) is strong to moderate and has significantly reduced for the later born cohorts (both BCS70 and LSYPE), suggesting that some young people in the more recent cohorts might expect to continue in further education, even if they do not perform too well in their math and reading tests at Key Stage 2 (age 10). In interpreting this finding, it has to be kept in mind however, that the assessments of academic attainment were not the same for the three cohorts, and that in the latest cohort nearly all young people expect to continue in further education. The association between parental education and education expectations of the young people themselves (F) has also reduced for the latest born cohort (LSYPE), suggesting that compared to previous age cohorts, education expectations of young people in the most current cohort are less strongly influenced by their parents' education.

The association between academic attainment and school motivation (G) has also reduced for the later born cohort, especially for boys, suggesting that young men with good academic capabilities might increasingly become disengaged from learning. The association between parental education and school motivation (H) is only weak and has not changed much across cohorts, except for girls, suggesting that school motivation among girls in the most recent cohort might be high even if their parents are not highly educated.

There is a moderately strong link between academic attainment at age 10/11 and parental expectations for their child to continue in further education (I). This link has however reduced for the later born cohorts, especially for girls in BCS and for boys in LSYPE, suggesting that in the more recent cohorts parental education expectations for their children are less strongly linked to previous academic attainment. The association between parental education and parental education expectations for their children (J) has also reduced, especially for girls in the latest born cohort, suggesting that parents with little education are increasingly expecting their children to continue in further education.

The correlation between teen's and parental education expectations (L) is strong, yet has somewhat reduced for the latest born cohort (LSYPE), suggesting that parent-child interactions are still important regarding the expression of education expectations, although less so than in previous cohorts. The finding

might also indicate that teens in the most current cohort are increasingly expecting to continue in further education, even if their parents do not expect the same. In combination with the observation that parental expectations in LSYPE are lower than those of their children, this finding could also mean that young people are expecting to continue in further education, even if their parents do not.

The correlation between school motivation and educational expectations of the young person (M) has also reduced for the latest born cohort (LSYPE), suggesting that more young people might expect to continue in further education even if they do not like school. The correlation between parental expectations and school motivation has also reduced for the latest born cohort (LSYPE), possibly indicating that compared to previous cohorts, school motivation in the most recent cohort is less strongly influenced by parental education expectations for their children.

There are generally more cohort than gender differences in the pathway coefficients. However, regarding gender differences in pathways we can see that in NCDS and BCS the association between academic attainment and education expectations (E) is stronger than for boys than for girls, suggesting that education expectations among girls might be less strongly influenced by their previous academic attainment than among boys. In BCS70 academic attainment is more strongly associated with parental education expectations for their sons than for their daughters, and education expectations of boys are more strongly linked to school motivation than among girls. In LSYPE teen and parental expectations are less strongly associated among girls than among boys, suggesting that girls might be less strongly influenced by their parents than boys when deciding about their education transition.

## Discussion

Since the 1970's educational expectations of teenagers have dramatically increased, especially among girls. In 1974 about a third of 16-year olds expected to continue in full time education after compulsory schooling, with little differences between boys and girls. In 1986 this has increased to about three fifths, and in 2006 most pupils expect to continue in further education: 82 per cent of boys and over 90 per cent of girls. At the same time, the influence of parental education and previous academic attainment on the expression of education expectations has reduced, which might suggest the emergence of a new norm of further education for all, regardless of academic aptitude or social background (Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Reynolds and Pemberton 2001; Rosenbaum 2001). However, young people whose parents have participated in further education beyond compulsory schooling are more likely to do well in standardised tests measuring academic attainment than students whose parents did not participate in further education, and are more likely to expect to partici-

pate in further education themselves. The findings might thus suggest the increasing marginalisation of young people from less educated parents.

Girls appear to be generally more ambitious than boys. Especially in the latest born cohort more girls than boys expect to continue in full-time education beyond compulsory schooling. In the 1989/90 cohort findings furthermore suggest that associations between parental education and parental expectations have loosened, especially for daughters, possibly suggesting that less educated parents might consider their daughters as more suited for further education or training than their sons. These findings might suggest a reversal of a gender gap in higher education that once favoured males (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Fran & Marini, 2000) and a shift in family resources towards girls (Hauser & Kuo, 1997; Jacobs, 1996). Changing patterns in the social stratification of education expectations and participation will have implications regarding participation in the labour market, marriage markets, and patterns of family formation that lie beyond the scope of this study.

The need to study the long-term consequences of generally increased education expectations has also been emphasised by those authors who noted the negative consequences of a 'college for all' norm in the US (Rosenbaum, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999), as it is not realistic for all students to succeed, especially for those who are least prepared academically, and those with little knowledge and information about specific career paths. In the US nearly 70 per cent of high school students will begin a postsecondary experience, yet only a third of postsecondary students will complete a degree in a seven year period (NCES, 2007). Moreover, many high school graduates find themselves unemployed after school or job hopping, and those who found employment were often only continuing the same dead-end jobs they already held during high school (Rosenbaum, 2001).

Potential problems associated with generally increased education expectations are also indicated in this study. On the one hand, the findings indicate that some bright young people, especially boys, might become disengaged from school, given the reduced association between previous academic attainment and motivation. On the other, the findings suggest that raised expectations might mask underlying issues of low academic performance and motivation. The association between academic attainment at age 10/11 and education expectations expressed at age 16 as well as school motivation has decreased for the latest born cohort, suggesting that young people in the most recent cohort might expect to continue in further education even if they lack the academic capabilities or do not like school, i.e. are disengaged from learning. That students, regardless of their social background, capabilities, or motivation, see further education as a realistic and attainable goal may be evidence of declining stratification, and may reflect that further education may soon become nearly universal in the UK. However, the observed changes in associations with educational expectations might merely reflect decreasing variations in education

expectations, as nearly all young people in the 1989/90 cohort expect to continue in further education.

In interpreting the findings, it has to be kept in mind that in 1973 compulsory school leaving age had been raised from 15 to 16 years, making the 1958 cohort the first to stay on in education until age 16, while in 2007 proposals have been made to increase compulsory school leaving age first to age 17 and then to 18 years by 2015 in order to increase the UK skill base in a globally competitive market. There has also been a considerable change in the UK higher education sector over the last decade, with an increasing number of entrants into higher education, which in turn might have had a significant 'role model' effect across successive cohorts (McVicar & Rice, 2001; Feinstein & Symons, 1999). As more people go to university, a degree will become a passport to a good job. Moreover, the wage premium for a tertiary degree compared with an upper secondary degree for male workers in the UK was 65 per cent in the year 2001 – the third highest among 17 OECD countries (Strauss & de la Maisonneuve, 2007). These might be incentives to increase young people's expectations and change their perceptions regarding higher education – although the evidence of high returns for education might change in the future (Brown, 2008).

It also has to be considered that raising expectations is not enough to equip young people to navigate uncharted territories. It is also necessary to offer information about how to realize one's ambitions, for example, information about the necessary skills to succeed in higher education, how to obtain grant and bursaries, how to steer through the education system, or how to secure stable employment – and moreover to provide crucial resources and support structures. In Britain state support for young people has been withdrawn and parents are expected to accept the financial responsibility for their children to continue in further education, although there is no legislation increasing the age limit for parental responsibility (Jones, 2009). This leaves a gap in the social protection arrangements for those unable to draw on parental support, and a situation where parents with no experience of further education have to decide whether to support their children's access to further education, because they control the financial resources. Current policies are based on the assumption that there is a consensus between parents and their children about how best to navigate the transition from school to work. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that this is not necessarily the case. In the 1958 cohort parental education expectations appear to be higher than those of the young people themselves, while in the LSYPE cohort young people appear to have higher expectations than their parents. Parents might thus be less in support of further education than their children and vice versa. The findings also suggest that the association between parental and teen expectations has reduced for the latest born cohort, although it remains strong. High parental expectations are positively related to high expectations of their children, suggesting that parent-child



interactions continue to play an important role, yet compared to previous cohorts young people in the latest born cohort are less likely to link their education expectations to those of their parents. Without parental support it will however be very difficult for young people to realize their ambition. Even if students' increasing expectation lead them to enroll in further education, there may be many other obstacles to be removed, and inequality in educational and occupational outcomes may be maintained through the type and purpose of the post-secondary institution a student attends. A more complete understanding of changing educational and occupational opportunities for young people needs to consider the multiple interlinked factors and processes shaping academic attainment, educational expectations and motivation, as well as enduring constraints related to specific academic fields and vocations and social patterns in opportunities that vary by gender, ethnicity, and family background. The life course approach offers an integrative framework enabling the study of multiple, interlinked levels of influence and their dynamic interactions over time, building a bridge for a better understanding of macro-level change and micro-level response and vice versa.

The study has made use of three large scale follow-up studies of young people preparing for the transition out of compulsory schooling in 1974, 1986 and 2006, covering a period of more than 30 years. In interpreting the findings a number of limitations have to be considered. While the two cohort studies born in 1958 and 1970 are largely representative studies of young people born in Britain during that year, the 1989/90 cohort is based on young people attending schools in England only (not covering Wales or Scotland). Further studies should examine regional variations in education expectations in more detail. The hypothesized pathways examined in the model test specific assumptions regarding the influences on education expectations in times of social change. The observed associations do not imply causal relationships between the factors, as there might be other explanatory processes not included in the model. For example, the role of teachers, peers, or the wider social network have not been explored, and are beyond the scope of this study. As in most longitudinal studies the analysis presented here is constrained by having to make best use of the available data, their measurement level and timing. In all three age cohorts we could identify similar data regarding parental education, school motivation, education expectations of 16-year olds and their parents, although based on different assessments and/or mixed measurement levels, and the wording used in the assessment of education expectations has not been the same in the three cohorts. Using dichotomized data reduces some of the variability in the data and better estimates might have been obtained using data directly collected for this study. Furthermore, academic attainment at age 10/11 has been measured with different assessment instruments, and the data has been standardized for comparison across cohorts. Using path analysis as implemented in the program Mplus 5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007) allowed us to analyse data on mixed meas-

urement levels, although in interpreting the path coefficients the measurement level and assessment of the variables has to be taken into consideration. Another issue to be addressed here is missing data, which might have affected the validity of the results. Response bias at the individual level would tend to underestimate the magnitude of effects of social disadvantage, as sample attrition is greatest among cohort members in more deprived circumstances (Plewis et al., 2004). The problem of missingness in the data was addressed using multiple imputations as implemented in Mplus 5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007) as a 'best effort' technique. Nonetheless, the results might provide a conservative estimate of social inequalities in the sample.

Despite these concerns, the study contributes to a better understanding of how experiences occurring on the macro-level affect individual functioning on the micro-level and how they are mediated via experiences in the family environment. A changing socio-historical context brings with it changes in norms regarding the timing of transitions, institutionalized rules, and individual expectations, as indicated by Elder and colleagues (2004). There has been a dramatic increase in the expectations for further education among young people as well as their parents. The increase in education expectations is not attributable to demographic changes alone, although the educational attainment of parents of current student cohorts has risen. The association between parental education and education expectations has actually reduced for the most recent cohort, as has the association between academic attainment and education expectations, suggesting the emergence of a new norm of education for all, regardless of social background and academic aptitude. Given the risk for failure, especially for those who are least prepared for further studies, or who can least afford it, there is a need to improve structure of state support, recognizing changing parent-child interactions and dependencies, as well as the role of non academic skills, such as school motivation. More attention should also be paid to providing relevant information regarding changing education and employment opportunities, how to prepare for the transition from school to work, and how to motivate young people in the school context. Although the study is based on data collected in Britain and England, the findings will have relevance in other Western countries, given the globally changing labour markets, the need for a skilled workforce, and the increasing expectations of young people regarding further education (OECD, 2008).

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